Wilderness—America's Lands Apart

By John G. Mitchell with photos by Peter Essick, *National Geographic*, November 1998, pp. 2-33

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It is hard to resist a place that is known as Kootznoowoo, Fortress of the Bears. That's what the resident Tlingit call it, rejecting the square-rigged English name, Admiralty Island, and the antique fur trader's Russian, Ostrov Kutsnoi, Fear Island. One wonders which the fur men feared more—the Tlingit or the bears. Or the wilderness.

And wilderness it remains, most of this island in the rain forest archipelago of southeast Alaska—nearly a million acres of statutory uppercase-W Wilderness set aside by the U.S. Congress out of the country's largest national forest, the Tongass. There are 18 other designated wilderness areas in the Tongass and 624 throughout the federal lands of the United States. A lot to choose from. But because of my lack of resistance to bears, I have chosen Kootznoowoo to help me gather my thoughts about wilderness and share what I've seen and heard of it elsewhere over the years.

A floatplane has brought me to this pebbled beach at the edge of Windfall Harbor, a notch in Kootznoowoo northeast of the Tlingit village of Angoon. About 600 people live in that village. The island's bears are said to outnumber them two to one.

Coming in, we saw a couple of bears from the air, big brown grizzlies grazing on spawned-out salmon in the estuaries of Windfall's graveled streams. My companion, David Cline, an Anchorage conservationist and chairman of the nonprofit Kodiak Brown Bear Trust, instructed the pilot to put us down at a beach where there aren't any salmon streams. Though Cline had once been charged by a grizz and successfully outbluffed it, he assured me that coastal bruins prefer salmon to people almost every time. *Almost?* I wondered. And I forgot to bring pepper spray.

It is a fortress all right, this Kootznoowoo Wilderness. Beyond the beach the forest begins in a tangle of saltwater sedge and alder, then reaches for the sky in jagged battlements of Sitka spruce and western hemlock. Inland the forest floor yields a labyrinth of giant moss-covered snags and nettlesome clumps of devil's club. West, above the misted moat of Windfall Harbor, the mountains rise steeply through layered clouds to elevations of 4,000 feet. It is the kind of terrain that frowns on a casual stroll. The place for walking is the beach, at low tide. In the morning Cline and I will catch that tide and walk up the beach to the head of the harbor, looking for bears at a respectful distance.

So what thoughts do I have to gather, standing alone at the edge of the water while Cline scouts the fortress for a good place to camp? Only that one can never know enough about wilderness even if one has been scratching the territory and the idea for half a lifetime. And *that* is something to gather right off the bat, for wilderness is not just a place, or a congeries of places, or a management system—the National Wilderness Preservation System—that was put in place by an act of Congress. Wilderness is an idea. It is an idea at once personal and worldly—as personal as risk and freedom and solitude and spiritual refreshment, as worldly as the living earth and waters that define it.

More than a century and a half ago the Concord eccentric Henry David Thoreau begged in writing to be shown "a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure." If he ever came close to experiencing such a thing, it was likely near the top of Maine's Mount Katahdin in September 1846. He would write of feeling "the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man." It was a presence I had clearly felt myself, often in mountain country, once or twice in places where I imagined no other human might ever have stood. I had felt it too just moments ago, after our pilot waved good-bye, kicked on the engine of his plane, and taxied into the harbor for his takeoff toward Juneau.

"Talk of mysteries!" Thoreau had written of those other woods a wild continent away. "Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world!" I watched the floatplane lift off the water into the clouds. Then even the sound of it was gone. "*Contact*!" Thoreau had written, and for a second I thought I might have said the word myself. "*Contact*!"

On September 3, 1964, after eight years of deliberation and 66 drafts, an act creating the National Wilderness Preservation System passed under the pen of President Lyndon B. Johnson. The measure established 54 wilderness areas in national forests in 13 states and decreed that the 9.1 million acres within them were to be protected in their natural condition. Wilderness, the act declared, was to be recognized "as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." And the law further stipulated that such areas were to be forever free of "permanent improvements" such as roads and man-made structures.

Additional measures were later enacted to include more wildlands in the eastern U.S. and expand protection beyond national forests to selected backcountry areas of the National Park System, the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the public domain of the Bureau of Land Management. In 1980 the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act more than doubled the system's existing acreage while allowing established practices, such as the use of motorboats and floatplanes, prohibited in most wilderness areas in the lower forty-eight. Today the nation's 624 wilderness areas embrace more than a hundred million acres, or about 4.5 percent of the U.S. landmass.

Even before a wilderness system was officially in place, exuberance and a fondness for mountain scenery posted me along the edges of a few of its future sites. I recall a scramble on the Great Western Divide of the Sierra Nevada above Mineral King, where the trail cairns made contact with a high, craggy country destined to become the Sequoia–Kings Canyon Wilderness. At 736,980 acres it is California's second largest, after the Death Valley Wilderness. And once there was a wind-chapped prowl on a spiny, porphyritic ridgetop in New Hampshire's White Mountains, above the green gulf of the once and future Pemigewasset Wilderness.

Since those early days, my sorties into this diverse assemblage of wildlands have ranged from a tundra hike in the most remote of them all, the Mollie Beattie Wilderness (eight million acres in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on Alaska's North Slope), to a binocular visit to one of the system's smallest units, Three Arch Rocks (a 15-acre seabird sanctuary off the Oregon coast—and off-limits to humans). But I've missed so much of it too—the Delirium and the Menagerie, Apache Kid and Cache la Poudre, the Washakie, the Popo Agie, the Irish, the Scapegoat and the Superstition, Bisti, Bear Wallow, Blood Mountain, and Hell Hole Bay, among many others.

Still, I have seen and heard enough, in the places that I didn't miss, to report that the National Wilderness Preservation System is holding up reasonably well after nearly 35 years. Not that its stewards are wanting for problems. Like the national forests, parks, and refuges that contain it, Wilderness U.S.A. is peppered with problems of heavy use, abuse, and underfunding, eroded trails, invasive species, squabbling constituencies, and local interests hostile to government regulation. Yet so far, for the most part, the resource prevails.

Of all the problems, visitor impact on trails and campsites consumes the largest segment of the backcountry managers' time and charges. Almost everyone in the U.S. today lives within an easy day's drive of a wilderness area, and each year more people are making the trip. Though absolute numbers are hard to come by, the agencies report that recreational use of wilderness has increased sevenfold over the past three decades. The most heavily used areas remain those closest to large metropolitan areas, such as Denver, Los Angeles, and Seattle. Near Seattle the Alpine Lakes and Mount Baker Wilderness Areas are about as hard hit by hikers and backpackers—and erosive rainstorms—as any in the system. "Just trying to keep these mountain trails open is a major challenge," says Gary Paull of the Forest Service. "And it doesn't help to be operating with a trails budget two-thirds of what it was three years ago."

Such problems seem remote here at the misty edge of Kootznoowoo, where there are no visitors but us and no greater immediate challenge than the prospect of starting a cook fire with wet wood.

It is done. From hemlock shavings come wisps of white smoke, a puff of orange, glowing, growing, curling around the kindling. Done. David Cline is a good scout.

Sitting now with our boots to the woodsmoke, Cline and I agree that while those little gas-fed backpacker stoves may be ecologically correct—if not obligatory in wood-scarce or combustible backcountry—they cannot begin to match the crackling ambience of a good old-fashioned campfire. What is it that bonds us so tightly to woodsmoke and pyrolysis? The spark of some primordial memory, the gene that reminds us how dreadful it must have been when the dark was never light enough at the back of the cave? Cline isn't sure, and neither am I.

Nor can we be sure of absolute answers when the fireside chat turns to contemporary questions, such as the pros and cons of manipulating wilderness in order to preserve or restore some degree of primeval naturalness. Fire sits at the center of that issue too, not our tidy Kootznoowoo campfire but rather the big burns ignited by nature's lightning and the smaller burns prescribed by human managers to compensate for decades of fire suppression.*

In a few wilderness areas natural wildfires are no longer suppressed where they pose no threat of serious smoke pollution or damage to neighboring properties. But in many regions natural fires may not occur often enough to restore wild land to what some scientist thinks might have been its pristine, pre-Smokey Bear condition. In which case the managers may intervene by orchestrating a prescribed burn.

"In designated wilderness," Cline says, "I'd have a problem with that, just as I would with suppression of fire."

So would a lot of other people. I tell Cline of my visit to a wilderness conference at the University of Montana in Missoula a few months earlier and of the dichotomy there between defenders of intervention management and those who believe wilderness is managed best when it is managed least or not at all. "We can't just let these areas 'go,' or we'll end up with something we never anticipated," said one scientist who advocates intervention. But on the other side of the issue, Tom Power, a writer and economics professor at the University of Montana, told me: "The wilderness agencies have no humility, just this sweeping idea that landscape managers can do better than nature can."

More troublesome than fire for some managers is the prospect of exotic species invading wilderness to usurp native habitats. In Montana years ago horses or cows introduced the seeds of two unwelcome plants, leafy spurge and spotted knapweed. The exotics have since spread over hundreds of thousands of acres, transforming wilderness grasslands into weedy barrens.

Meanwhile, in dozens of wilderness areas across the country, lakes and streams were stocked with non-native fish to enhance the visitor's recreational opportunities. But all too often there was an unexpected catch: The alien species ate up or starved out the indigenous ones and altered the ecosystem. So what's the solution? Do managers, as some would argue, refrain from further meddling and hope that nature will set things right in the long run? Or, for the sake of restoring a lost naturalness, do they intervene—sometimes with chemicals—to purge the spurge and the alien trout?

Cline, who once served a hitch as a wilderness biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service here in Alaska, is squinting at me through the wood-smoke. We agree there is no easy answer. What might succeed on a wilderness island off the coast of Alaska might not work at all off the coast of Georgia.

Cumberland Island is the southernmost of Georgia's barrier islands and its largest, with 17 miles of white-sand beach and a maritime forest of moss-draped live oaks and towering loblolly pines. It is not connected to the mainland by bridge or causeway. For that reason, among others, much of Cumberland was acquired by the National Park Service in 1972 and declared a national seashore. Ten years later, at the behest of conservationists who feared the Park Service might develop the seashore for intensive recreation, Congress designated nearly 9,000 of its 36,400 acres as statutory wilderness. In so doing, however, Congress recognized that certain nonconforming uses and structures, such as the narrow unpaved road that runs the length of the island, could not soon be abandoned. They would have to be phased out over the years. Cumberland, in effect, would be a

kind of evolving wilderness. Thus, even now, motor vehicles belonging to the Park Service and private landowners have access to this road and to the wide-open avenue of the beach. Backpackers complain that the vehicles disrupt their wilderness experience.

But some advocates of a wild Cumberland are more concerned that the island's ecological stability has been put at risk by feral hogs and horses. The hogs, introduced as provender in antebellum days, compete with native wildlife for the island's slim pickings, including sea turtle eggs. Park Service trappers and marksmen have had scant success controlling the porcine population. The free-ranging horses, some descended from Arizona mustangs imported early in this century to entertain wealthy landowners, now number nearly 200 and are decidedly competitive for browse with white-tailed deer. The sight of mares and stallions trotting along the beach has proved so entertaining to visitors that the Park Service is loath to have the horses removed.

One day on Cumberland I called on Carol Ruckdeschel, a biologist who lives at the island's north end, beyond the wilderness area, collecting and autopsying the carcasses of sea turtles washed up on the beach. Ruckdeschel, like many of the island's two dozen residents whose tenure predates the seashore designation, retains the right to live out her life here and to drive on the beach and the road. An ardent wilderness booster, she tries to keep her transportation profile low to the ground, the preferred ride being a one-cylinder all-terrain vehicle.

"If you just look ahead a hundred years or so," Ruckdeschel said, "there'll be something special here. We'll all be dead and gone—no more people living out here. And no vehicles. Hell, right now the hogs and the horses cause more damage than the vehicles do."

Now, on Kootznoowoo, Cline and I have polished our dinner plates, poured a nightcap, and are silently roasting our separate thoughts over glowing coals. For my own part, I'm wondering how accessible wilderness can be, and still be Wilderness.

Sure, cracking Kootznoowoo was easy with a floatplane. But if this were a wilderness constrained by the rules of the lower forty-eight, to reach Windfall Harbor we'd have been obliged to endure either a two-day paddle by sea kayak or an arduous 25-mile trek from Angoon. Which leaves me in a somewhat vulnerable position as I declare that I cannot understand why some critics of statutory wilderness regard restriction of motorized access as an act of discrimination against the old, the infirm, and the vehicularly pampered. Thus, these scoffers argue, access to wilderness is enjoyed only by the physically elite.

As one who assuredly is not among that elite, I affirm that neither age nor infirmity barred me last year from paddling a canoe into Florida's Juniper Prairie and Everglades Wilderness Areas, riding a horse into New Mexico's Gila, or poking afoot into the Otter Creek wilds of West Virginia far enough to absorb a short measure of solitude.

But, of course, there are many wildernesses where canoes, kayaks, or horses don't work, steep mountain places accessible only to the hardiest hikers. Last year I stood at the edge of a few of those places, looked in—or, rather, *up*—and, without too much regret, tipped my hat to the lost opportunity. It was like that with the Enchantments, in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness of Washington State.

I had heard about the Enchantments from a mountaineering friend in Seattle; about stark clusters of granite spires and glacial lakes and waterfalls and heather meadows and gnarled larches with needles that glowed like gold splinters in October; about the area's Lost World Plateau and the Knitting Needles and Dragontail Peak and Witches Tower. "The way is long, steep and grueling," one guidebook warns. "A strong hiker needs at least 12 hours to reach the high lakes. The average hiker takes 2 days. The rest never make it."

I knew where that left me. So early one morning in June I dropped by the Wenatchee National Forest ranger station in Leavenworth, Washington, to see if I could find a strong or average hiker waiting there to pick up a permit to camp overnight in the Enchantments. Because of lingering snow at elevations over 6,000 feet—the Cascade summits here top 8,000—June is not the most popular month for backpacking the Enchantments. But I

was in luck. Mark Simon and his friend Heather Wolfe, permits in hand, were getting ready to head out. They both looked strong enough, in their early 20s, traveling light with 30-pound packs, food for three days. They'd take it slow, Simon said, because of his bad knee. "Blew out a ligament skiing last winter," he explained.

How did he feel about the Forest Service restricting overnight use with permits issued by advance reservation or daily lottery? Did he feel that was an infringement of his liberty to use public land? "It's an inconvenience, that's all," he said. "The permits are a good thing. Without them, I don't think the Enchantments could withstand all the use they'd otherwise get."

I wished Simon and Wolfe happy hiking, paid my respects to the Leavenworth district ranger and her wilderness manager, and then drove out along the Icicle Creek Road to the Enchantments trailhead at Snow Creek. There was scattered dead timber on the slope that the trail ascended in switchbacks. I was hoping to catch a last glimpse of the couple working their way up the mountain, but already they were out of sight over the first ridge. Forget that blown-out ligament. Those two were better than average. And I was happy for them, because I knew they were going to make it to the high country.

Tents do not agree with me. Flat on my back in a sleeping bag, I much prefer the starlit sky to a nylon roof, except when the bugs are biting or the clouds are spitting—and that's what the clouds are doing to our tent tonight in the Kootznoowoo rain forest. A steady drizzle it is, just enough patter to muffle the imagined footfalls of insomniac bears. I try to think of other nights untented—no biting bugs, no spitting clouds, no grizzlies. I think of a night flat on my back beside the Middle Fork Gila River, with the rimrock framing a wedge of sky flecked with a million stars.

It was a pilgrimage, that horseback trip into the mountain backcountry of southwestern New Mexico. If I was going to celebrate the idea of federal wilderness, I had to go to the place where it began—sort of like celebrating the Fourth of July beside the Liberty Bell at Philadelphia's Independence Hall.

The Gila—pronounced hee-lah—is both river and wilderness tucked into a national forest of the same name. Elevations run from 5,000 feet on the floor of some canyons to nearly 11,000 on top of Whitewater Baldy in the Mogollon Mountains. Cool forests, sparkling trout streams, elk and bighorns and javelinas, black bears and mountain lions, solitude for those who seek it and scenery enough to knock your specs off. I went out of Gila Hot Springs with outfitter Becky Campbell, her husband, David Snow, and Charles Little, an old friend and writer with much savvy about matters of the land and why land counts in the human scheme of things. And I wanted Little's company in the Gila because he is savvy about Aldo Leopold.

We rode in through pinon and juniper country, down the twisty Little Bear Canyon to the Middle Fork, and then upstream between towering red rock cliffs and riverine sycamores to a parklike spot with plenty of dead Gambel oak for the cook fire and deep ponderosa shade for hobbling the stock. I thanked my horse, Tater, for the ride, staked out a stargazer's spot for my bedroll, and perched on the riverbank, watching for signs of insects and trout. Little sat down beside me, pointed at a big pool upstream, and said, "I'll bet you anything Aldo Leopold wet a fly line right there about 80 years ago."

Why 80?

"Because," said Little, "that's about the time Aldo Leopold got into this country first time around."

Leopold's is such a runaway story, we'd best pull back on the reins. He hailed from Iowa, long after the sodbusters had tamed the prairie. Maybe he got a taste of the wild during boyhood summers in the Les Cheneaux Islands, topside of Lake Huron; every time he looked north from there, he imagined boreal mysteries beyond the horizon. By and by he went to Yale, joined the Forest Service, was posted to Albuquerque, rode into the Gila on survey patrol.

One day in 1919 Leopold had a talk with another young forester named Arthur Carhart. A landscape architect by training, Carhart had this crazy idea that the shorefront of Trappers Lake, up in the White River National Forest of Colorado, ought to be preserved for its scenic value rather than developed with roads and summer cabins. It

was an encounter of kindred spirits. On behalf of scenery, Carhart would prevail in preserving Trappers Lake against the incipient roadbuilding mentality of the Forest Service, while Leopold within a few years would be advocating an even larger heresy—the setting aside of wilderness areas in national forests for public recreation. And what sort of area did he have in mind? An area "big enough to absorb a two weeks' pack trip," he wrote; a place "devoid of roads . . . or other works of man." Such as? Such as "the headwaters of the Gila River," a half million acres that could absorb a hundred pack trips a year "without overcrowding." In 1924, by administrative decree, the Forest Service designated a portion of the Gila as its first wilderness. (Today the Gila and the adjoining Aldo Leopold Wilderness embrace nearly 1,200 square miles.)

From Leopold's earliest writings—and from the Gila—the wilderness movement gained momentum, inducing the Forest Service to honor roadless areas as much as commercial clear-cuts and enrolling such influential leaders as Bob Marshall, a co-founder with Leopold of the Wilderness Society, and Howard Zahniser, who as that society's executive director would spearhead the legislative effort resulting in the Wilderness Act of 1964.

"And now," Charles Little was saying beside the Gila River, "we have a wilderness system, but I'm not sure we yet understand Leopold's wilderness idea. It's not just a matter of protecting land because it's scenic or because we can pack in for three days to catch trout. 'Land is a community,' Leopold wrote. Its waters, soils, plants, animals all fit together not for our sake but for their own."

"Trouble is," I said, "that's what's driving some people right up the wall."

In recent years I have encountered more than a few individuals who feel uneasy, if not threatened, when bureaucrats or new-wave biologists speak of preserving wilderness ecosystems at the expense of human use. That evening with Little beside the Gila River, we listened to the complaints of our outfitter, who was deeply concerned that officials in faraway places were making decisions—about livestock grazing in the Gila, for example—better left for the local folks to sort out. And one month later, in the northern Cascades of Washington State, I heard similar tales about government regulation from another outfitter, at a hideaway place called Stehekin.

For a perfect little community at the edge of wilderness, you'd be hard put to find one more remote than Stehekin. It sits up there at the top of that landlocked fjord, Lake Chelan, tucked into one big North Cascades National Park wilderness—the Mather—and bracketed by two other areas administered by the Forest Service—Glacier Peak and Lake Chelan–Sawtooth. Wilderness Village, some people call it, though not the handful who live there year-round served only by boat and floatplane, the lake so deep and windy it rarely freezes.

Cliff Courtney is the proprietor of the Stehekin Valley Ranch a few miles beyond the village, a hop and a skip from the Mather Wilderness. Courtney runs white-water raft trips on the Stehekin River and, with his brother Cragg, horse trips into the mountains. Some of the trips are called Hike & Like It, the idea being that you hike while a horse totes your gear.

One morning I sat with Cliff out behind the ranch's main lodge, looking across a stock corral and a field of new rye and over the spruce tops to mountain snowfields almost blinding in their whiteness. He was telling me about government regulations.

"They're talking about cutting us down to 12 sets of eyes," he said. "That means six horses and six people per trip. Not much for earnings when we used to be able to take 20 to 30 people a trip." Courtney took a deep breath and said, "You keep making it harder for people to be a part of wilderness, and you'll lose them. Okay, I may be grinding my own ax, but it seems to me the best thing you can do for wilderness is to show it to people and share it with people and let them see how great it is."

Courtney's father, Ray, who died in a trail accident some years back when a loose packhorse knocked him off a 200-foot cliff, helped form the North Cascades Conservation Council and led Sierra Club trips to promote wilderness designation. But later, Courtney said, his father felt betrayed when conservationists pushed for tighter controls on wilderness access.

"In a lot of people's minds," Courtney went on, "there's a real question whether all this overlayering of regulation is really to protect wilderness or part of some greater plan to keep people out. I find fewer and fewer everyday Joe and Sally Sixpacks who can relate to the wilderness. They haven't been there. For a lot of them, wilderness is just a word that means No."

It is morning in Kootznoowoo. The rain has stopped, the tide has ebbed. David Cline and I are walking up the beach toward the head of Windfall Harbor, toward that wide gravel estuary where we spotted one of those grazing grizzlies from the air. A harbor seal, goggle-eyed, watches us from the water. An eagle, suspicious of our approach, flees its roost at the top of a Sitka spruce. A mile away, on the other side of the harbor, a small dark spot moves slowly along the water's edge. Cline measures the spot with his eye and identifies it as a young grizzly.

Suddenly I am feeling exposed and alone on this wide-open strip of tidal cobble and glacial grit. Possibly it's that old Thoreauvian imagining again—the presence of a force not bound to be kind to me, or to Cline. Whatever it is, I like it. What I don't like are the forces not bound to be kind to wilderness.

As I follow Cline to the head of Windfall Harbor, I am thinking that the rule books by now ought to be pretty clear regarding motors and wilderness, but what about all these newfangled high-tech electronic devices that weren't even around when the Wilderness Act's language was drafted more than a generation ago? I mean what about cell phones, global positioning systems, and laptop computers? How wired can the wilderness be, and still be Wilderness?

Put that question to federal agencies, and you'll hear variations on a theme expressed by Jeff Jarvis, the Bureau of Land Management's wilderness leader. "Sure, these items will detract from the wilderness experience, but it's the individual's choice. We have no intention of regulating these devices any more than we would regulate the use of cameras."

Wes Henry, Jarvis's counterpart over at the National Park Service, agrees, but he responds to the question a bit more critically. "People are using these things as crutches," he says. "A woman called once on a cell phone from the middle of the wilderness. She said she had blisters and was tired and wanted us to take her out in a helicopter."

Cyberspace invasion of wilderness worries some purists more than cell phones do. The way they tell it, it won't be long before our backcountry trails are obstructed by hackers hunkered over their laptops, checking their e-mail.

Richard Bangs, a West Coast expeditionary entrepreneur and advocate of online adventure travel, has carried the information age even deeper into the wilds. Defending the use of computers, digital cameras, and satellite communications to link a wilderness expedition to a website, Bangs wrote: "The Internet is not the death of wilderness. It may be its savior. . . . For the first time, we can showcase the beauty and magic of a wild place to a global audience, and millions can participate in a journey through it without ever breaking a branch or stepping on [fragile] soil." Bangs's cyber-sorties have ranged from Africa to the Antarctic.

Virtual wilderness. It may be with us sooner than we think. In Minnesota the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Superior National Forest now has a website designed to help the prospective visitor plan a wilderness trip. Not everyone is ecstatic. Alan Watson, a social scientist at the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Center in Missoula, Montana, says: "They're approaching a level of information that makes me wonder why one would want to go to that wilderness. The sense of discovery is why people go there, but discovery's gone. Risk and adventure—gone. I felt like they'd just taken the Boundary Waters away from me."

At the head of Windfall Harbor a braided stream rushes out of the rain forest through a wide and open valley edged with alder and spruce. This is where, from the floatplane, we saw the big grizzly. This morning no bear is in sight. "I'll bet you it's up there," Cline says. "Taking a nap in those alders. Bloated with salmon." I can believe it, because this stream is bloated with salmon—thousands of them, mostly pinks, dead or dying in the shallow

riffles, the last of the spawners fighting the flow with flapping tails, humpbacks atilt. What a movable feast for the seagulls, the eagles, and the bears. And what a gift to the sea as the uneaten carcasses rot and post their nutrients down this stream to nourish invertebrates—the food supply for next year's salmon. Contact. This is how wilderness works.

But where is the bear?

"We *could* stroll upstream a way," Cline says.

"*You* could. I'll watch."

Cline splashes across a channel and takes a direction that looks discreetly sideways to upstream. Be wary of poetic justice, Cline. You don't want to deprive the Kodiak Brown Bear Trust in Anchorage of its chairman.

My friend's passage across the gravel bars puts the squabbling gulls to flight, and suddenly I find myself wrapped in a circle of silence that is punctured only by the stream that runs through it and by the struggle of the dying fish. I close my eyes and try to imagine the measure of this million acres of Kootznoowoo Wilderness, this one percent of all our designated wilderness between the Arctic and the Everglades. The devil in me asks, Do we really need it all? Isn't a hundred million acres more than enough for scenery and solitude and risk and self-discovery and genetic diversity and, as a wise woman once remarked, for securing answers to questions we have not yet learned how to ask?

Or is a hundred million acres *not* enough?

There are those—on the right hand of Congress and in the western countryside—who say we have too much wilderness already and should forthwith unhinge it from the federal estate. But others, citing the pressures and stresses on existing wildlands, argue that we could double the size of the system and still be deficient. Advocates cheer a recent Clinton Administration temporary moratorium on roadbuilding in millions of acres of national forest, thereby suspending logging and converting those lands into de facto, though impermanent, wilderness areas. They demand additional wilderness in the forests of the Northwest, the Rockies, and the Appalachians. They call on the National Park Service to complete or update its review of wilderness study areas in 27 parks, including Grand Canyon, Glen Canyon, and Big Cypress. They want the Bureau of Land Management to recommend to a divided Congress the designation of 8.5 million acres of red rock mesas and canyons in southern Utah. Some even say that 58 million acres of wilderness in Alaska is not enough; 125 million acres more should be designated.

"We have only a fraction of the wilderness we're going to need," says Gaylord Nelson, the former senator from Wisconsin, father of Earth Day, and longtime counselor to the Wilderness Society. "Our public lands are being overwhelmed by population pressures. There'll be half a billion people in this country by 2075. The rarest thing you'll find by that time will be a natural area undisturbed by the hand of man. It will be a real tragedy if we don't start now doubling or even tripling the extent of our designated wilderness."

Cline has come back from his reconnoiter with a sad sort of smile on his face. "Gets pretty narrow up there," he says, hooking his thumb at the alder-edged valley behind him. "Not a good place to spook a sleeping bear." We head back toward camp. About a hundred yards down the beach,

Cline stops and turns to look one more time at the gravel flats and the long green valley tapering into the rain forest. If I know Cline—and what wilderness does to people like him—I know exactly what he's feeling. He doesn't want to leave the uncertain presence in the alders. He wants to go back up that valley, into the real world.

In Wilderness, Don't Phone Home

By Christina Nelson, *High Country News*, Vol. 30, No. 15, August 17, 1998

A man recently fell and broke his leg while hiking in the wilderness area above Boulder, Colorado. While I wondered aloud how anyone could meet this fate in such a well-worn area, it was his rescue that piqued my attention. The lost hiker carried a cell phone and a hand-held Global Positioning System (GPS), a precision electronic navigation aid that locks onto orbiting satellites and calculates your exact position and movement.

He called 911, gave them his exact coordinates, and rescue was fast and efficient.

Yes, things are a changin' in the Wild West. A study by Duracell Battery finds that 38 percent of vacationers now pack a cell phone or pager. Eighteen percent bring along a notebook personal computer or electronic personal organizer.

On a recent hike into the high country, a friend of mine pulled out his cell phone at 13,000 feet, sat on the edge of a stunningly beautiful rock precipice and dialed his wife two states away. I didn't know that he had taken the phone, and was immediately torn by strong, opposing opinions. On one hand, the romance of it all. I mean, what woman wouldn't love to hear her lover's voice from a mountain top? To know that amid such beauty he was thinking of her? But the pit in my stomach told me that deeper feelings prevailed; feelings that had to do with the cell phone's immediate transformation of the wilderness.

I go to wilderness to leave linear time behind. I also leave behind the world of instant access, where phones, e-mail, cars and airplanes provide fast contact with anyone in the world. It is a step from the planned, organized, domesticated world into the realm of the unexpected. Whether a meadow of mariposa lilies or a sudden lightning storm at tree line, the beautiful and dangerous surprises of wilderness keep me well-honed. I must plan carefully. I must be aware of changes in wind and weather.

A cell phone changes all of this. Suddenly, I don't have to be responsible for poor planning, silly mistakes or bad luck. Like the hiker who broke his leg, I don't even have to take a map if I have my toys. In today's world, rescue teams with helicopters wait to save me from myself.

Colorado has approximately 3 million acres of wilderness and multitudinous millions of acres of national forest. Like its neighbors, much of its land is public. Public lands are, in fact, the partial definition of the West. For years, people have come to the forests and filled darkness with Coleman lanterns. Then, they filled silence with ghetto blasters. And now, they fill solitude with instant access to the technological world.

Next week, I'm riding my horse into the wilderness to camp alone for a few days. I'll pack a .357 on my hip. Three shots, three whistles, three of any noise is a distress signal. This is closer to the West I came to live in 20 years ago. A place where danger and beauty coincide, where I am part of the food chain, vulnerable to weather changes, dependent upon instinct. A place where personal responsibility gets the utmost test.

Yes, part of my gear will be a space-age fabric, lightweight tent. I will take a down jacket for warmth, and a small cooking stove. I do not wax negative on the products of technology. But somehow, my gut tells me that we've crossed the line with cell phones in wilderness.

It's about taking chances. In today's sanitized world we've minimized risk so much that the psyche deadens, and violence becomes more and more perverse. There's a reason why old cultures ritualized violence. The psyche and soul need tests. This is why rodeo still lives in the West, why cowboys still brave the elements with their stock across miles of dangerous terrain, and people leave the safety of their homes with a pack on their back and head into the mountains.

Phones and computers change the wilderness as much as forbidden roads and chainsaws. Perhaps more.

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The Wilderness of History

By Donald Worster, *Wild Earth*, Fall, 1997, pp. 9-13

I live in a part of America without any wilderness—no large tracts of land existing within hundreds of miles that are free of producing a commodity. This country used to be wild prairie running north all the way to the Saskatchewan; now, we have less than one percent of the original tallgrass prairie left, and much of the shortgrass is gone too.

Last fall, it is true, we finally got a prairie national park. The struggle was long and tough against the Farm Bureau, the cattlemen's association, and former Senator Robert Dole (who balked at spending $10 million for park acquisition but not at $1 billion for National Guard aircraft to beat back our enemies). Even now, with the park a legislative reality, a Texas businessman has his cattle out there, on a lease, and the anti-park forces are insisting that the cattle stay there; they demand it be a monument to the beef industry rather than returning it to bison and pronghorn. Anyway, they say, that land was never wilderness.

Such assertions are getting support, unintended though it may be, from some of my colleagues in environmental history, many of whom I fear have not spent enough time among the good folks who claim to "work for a living" – members of the Farm Bureau, for example – and do not sufficiently appreciate how hard it is to get an ethic of environmental restraint and responsibility established among fierce private property and marketplace advocates. Otherwise, my colleagues would be a little more careful about the sensational headlines they encourage, like "Wilderness is a Bankrupt Idea."

That is not the headline that William Cronon really wanted to see when he wrote his controversial essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," published in the book *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (1995). What he meant to say, I think, was that sometimes wilderness defenders have hurt their cause by sophomoric rhetoric that alienates thoughtful people and lacks any social compassion. He may be right on that score. The wilderness movement needs more self-scrutiny, needs a larger commitment to social justice—and, above all, needs the patience to read its critics more carefully. On the other hand, Cronon and some other authors in *Uncommon Ground* should take a dose of their own medicine. They have at times inflamed the discourse, missed the more profound ethical core of the movement, and made a few weak, shallow arguments of their own—arguments that need critical scrutiny and exposure. Therefore, with hope for a more mutually respectful and probing debate than we have had so far, I examine some of those arguments. Here is my list of major errors being committed about the wilderness by some environmental historians.

Error # 1:
North America (we are told) was never a "wilderness" – not any part of it.
Some revisionist historians now argue that ignorant Europeans, animated by "virgin land" fantasies and racial prejudices, had it all wrong. The continent was not a wilderness; it was a landscape thoroughly domesticated and managed by native peoples. It was Indians, not low rainfall and high evaporation rates, who created a vast sweep of grassland all the way from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, and they did so by constant burning. They herded the Bison like domesticates in a big pasture. They cultivated the wild plants and made a garden of the place. All over the continent, they completely civilized the wasteland long before the white man got here.

I respect the Native American stewardship and would not take credit away from their considerable achievements, but such characterizations by historians are huge extrapolations from limited examples. Two million people spread over what is now Canada and the United States, a people armed with primitive stone tools, simply could not have truly "domesticated" the whole continent. [1]

By comparison, 300 million Americans and Canadians today, armed with far more powerful technology, have not wholly domesticated the continent yet; in the US, by a strict standard of evaluation, 100 million acres of virtually pristine wilderness exists under protection while more is without protection, and in Canada areas with no roads, towns, mines, or mills still dominate most of the north.

We are further told by some historians that the Indians were pushed out of their domesticated homeland in order to *create* a wilderness for the white man. There certainly was a massive dispossession, often bloody and ruthless. But if our national parks, wilderness areas and wildlife refuges were once claimed by native Americans, shifting in tribal identity over time, so once were our cities, farms, universities, indeed the very house lots on which we dwell. What are we now to do about that fact? Should we give all national park and wilderness areas back to the native Americans? Or open them for subsistence hunting (by people likely to be armed with modern rifles and snowmobiles) or for agriculture? If we do that, then are we logically bound to permit the same repossession of our campuses, suburbs, and cornfields? I have not heard anyone, however, seriously propose that Los Angeles or Stanford University be returned to their "rightful owners." Why not? Why are parks and wilderness areas viewed as suspect forms of expropriation while the vast portion of the country under modern American economic use is not really questioned? Obviously, Indian land claims is not the real issue here; debunking preservationists is.

A more sensible policy would be to find out whether any of the 100 million acres of currently protected wilderness are in violation of valid treaty rights and, if they are, to settle in court or get the lands returned to their proper owners, as we should be doing with all contested lands. But I haven't seen any historian actually undertake that research project into the land claims within wilderness system. Nor do I see any definite, clear proposal coming from scholars about where and how to alter the size, shape, or rules governing our wilderness areas. Meanwhile, let it be noted that any American citizen, Indian or non-Indian, has free and equal access to the nation's wilderness, which is more than can be said about universities or suburbia.

Error # 2:
The wilderness is nothing real but is only a cultural construct dreamed up by rich white romantics.
I trace some of this oversimplified thinking to Roderick Nash's book, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, which (for all its many virtues) set up a flawed narrative that environmental historians have cribbed from ever since. The now standard story starts with an ancient, intense Judeo-Christian hostility toward the wild, an anti-wilderness culture of spectacular proportions and longevity. That hostility supposedly reached a crescendo in Puritan New England, where every farmer stepped out of his saltbox scowling at the forest. Then the story moves on to a dramatic reversal of attitudes as affluent, white, educated, secular, urban Americans became sensitive romantic lovers of Nature. Part of the scarcely hidden moral in that story is that ordinary people, without education or income, have been in serious cultural lag and cannot be depended on for any significant environmental change. But a more complicated reading of the past would suggest that the love of wilderness was not simply the "discovery" or "invention" of a few rich men with Harvard or Yale degrees coming at the end of a long dark age.

If you assume that standard account, then it becomes very easy to turn the entire story into a polemic against elitist snobs who seek the sanctuary of wilderness at the expense of peasants, workers, Indians, or the poor of the world. Of course there were and are people like that. If the story didn't have a kernel of truth in it, the revisionists would not get any kind of hearing at all. But it is a small kernel, not the whole complicated truth of what wilderness has meant to people through the ages or what draws them to protect wilderness today.

Contrary to the established story, the love of Nature (i.e., wilderness) was not merely a "cultural construct" of the Romantic period in Europe. It has much older cultural roots, and it may even have roots in the very structure of human feelings and consciousness going far back into the evolutionary past, transcending any cultural patterns. Historians of late have been far too quick to dismiss as "essentialist" any deep residuum of humanity and to reduce all thought and feeling to shifting tides of "culture." Nineteenth-century Romanticism, with its glorification of the sublime, was indeed a cultural expression, but it also may be understood as an effort to recover and express those deeper feelings which in all sorts of cultures have linked the beauty of the natural world to a sense of wholeness and spirituality. The enthusiasm for wilderness in America was undeniably a cultural fashion, but it also drew on that other-than-cultural hunger for the natural world that persists across time and space. Finally, it drew in the United States on a frontier-nourished spirit of liberty, which itself reflected both cultural and biological needs. Most importantly, that enthusiasm was felt by poor folks as well as rich.

Historians have tended to miss the broad social appeal of the wilderness movement, particularly in the twentieth century. They like to feature that brash, big-game hunting, monied New Yorker, Teddy Roosevelt, especially if they want to do a little lampooning, and ignore all the men and women from more humble origins, before and

after him, who played an important role in saving the wilderness. John Muir and Ed Abbey, to be sure, get plenty of attention though historians have seldom appreciated the fact of their rural, non-elite roots. Nor do they give much emphasis to the millions of wilderness seekers who do not like to kill big animals or thump their chests or order form Eddie Bauer catalogs. And then, after reading the poorer class of people out of the wilderness "construct," the historians turn around and proclaim: "See, wilderness has been an upper-class fetish all along." Finally, with no little condescension and inconsistency, they set out to correct the "naive," popular, grassroots "misunderstanding" of these matters.

Error # 3
The preservation of wilderness has been a distraction from addressing other, more important environmental concerns.
Precisely what are those problems? The protection of less exalted beauty close to home, we are told, not only in the remote, western public lands. The health and well being of urban people, particularly impoverished minority people, in the neighborhoods where they live. The wise and efficient use of natural resources that furnish our means of living. I grant that all these are important problems for environmentalists to face. They are in many ways linked, and they should not be severed and rigidly compartmentalized one from one another. Actually, I don't know any wilderness advocates who are single minded, who deny the existence or importance or interconnectedness of any of those other environmental problems. There may be some, but I have not met them. But I have met and will defend, the person, who out of deep moral conviction, believes that preservation of the world's last great wilderness is a higher obligation than cleaning up the Hudson River or preventing soil erosion. Someone who gives his or her life to wilderness issues instead of those other problems is not necessarily misguided or immoral or needing to be "reeducated."

But the main historical issue here is whether the wilderness movement has in fact significantly diminished American interest in other environmental problems. The claim that it has is repeatedly made; outside the carefully hoarded Wilderness Areas, it is charged, the country is a mess and their wilderness "obsession" encourages many environmentalists to do nothing about it. It is sometimes argued that preserving wilderness gave Americans the green light for exploiting other less pristine environments with no compunction. But where is the evidence that this has been so on any important scale? The major reason we abuse land, as Aldo Leopold told us a while back, is "because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us" rather than "a community to which we belong." Protecting wilderness by itself may not change that situation, but neither is it responsible for it.

Since the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964, the Untied States has seen an extraordinary increase in the number of people who call themselves environmentalists, and the issues they are working on range from preserving remnant wetlands threatened by shopping malls to stopping toxic dumping on Indian reservations to getting emission controls on smokestacks. The movement has become more and more diverse, inclusive, and pervasive. Far from being a distraction, the example of wilderness activism may even have encouraged the explosion of that diversification of environmental concern occurring across the whole country!

I live in a place where the immediate, compelling, and most practical need is to create an agriculture that is less destructive to soil, water, and biota, along with preventing real-estate developers from turning our towns into cultural and biological deserts. I serve on the board of directors of the Land Institute, which is trying to meet that important environmental need. Yet I can still cherish the thought of large, unmanipulated wilderness on this continent where the processes of evolution can go on more or less as they have for millennia. Does my commitment to saving wilderness in Alaska "alienate" me from the place where I live? Some historians say it must, but people are more complicated that that. Like millions of other Americans, I have a whole spectrum of concerns, near and far. I can support the Library of Congress without losing interest in my local public library.

We do have a legacy of bad land-use all over this country, which has left us with degraded forests, grasslands, and cities, and that legacy requires profound reform along a broad front. Developing an ethic of care and restraint wherever we live and wherever we take our resources—on that 95% of the nation's land area not protected as wilderness – is a clear, important need. How do we address it and move toward intelligent, just and wise use of land beyond the wilderness? Our recent history does not suggest that we need to get rid of the wilderness "fetish" in order to do so, or that we need to trash the leading popular arguments for preserving wilderness, which on the whole have worked pretty well against implacable opposition.

The wilderness has been a symbol of freedom for many people, and it is a primordial as well as cultural sense of freedom that they have sought. Freedom, it must be granted, can become another word for irresponsibility. Yet almost always the preservation of wilderness freedom in the United States has been interwoven with a counterbalancing principle of moral restraint. In fact, this linkage of freedom and restraint may be the most important feature of the wilderness movement. Those 100 million acres exist not only as a place where evolution can continue on its own terms, where we humans can take refuge from our technological creations, but also as a place where we can learn the virtue of restraint: this far we drive, plow, mine, cut, and no farther.

Old-time religion enforced moral restraint on their followers by the practice of tithing, a practice that has almost completely disappeared under the impact of the market revolution. But the practice of tithing is too good an idea to lose. Without saying so, we have created in the form of wilderness a new, more secular form of the ancient religious tithe. We have set aside a small portion of the country as the part we return to the earth that supports us, the earth that was here before any of us. We are not yet up to a full tithe, but we are still working on it.

A place of restraint as well as a place of freedom for all living things, the wilderness has promoted, I believe, a broader ethic of environmental responsibility all across the nation. Far from being an indefensible obsession, wilderness preservation has been one of our most noble achievements as a people. With no broad claims to American exceptionalism, I will say that here is a model of virtuous action for other societies to study and emulate. This is not to say that historians have been wrong to criticize weaknesses in the wilderness movement. They have only been wrong when they have denigrated the movement as a whole, carelessly encouraging its enemies, and made bad historical arguments. The real danger we face as a nation, we should remember, is not loving the wilderness too much but loving our pocketbooks more.

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[1] I am using the cautious but authoritative estimate of Douglas H. Ubelaker of the Smithsonian Institution, in his article "North American Indian Population Size, A.D. 1500 to 1985," American Journal of Physical Anthropology, 77 (1988): 291. He calculates an average density of 11 people per one hundred square kilometers, ranging from a low of 2 or 3 in the Arctic and Subartic to a high of 75 in California. Much larger and more controversial are the estimates of H.F. Dobyns, Their Numbers Became Thinned (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

Wilderness Is All In Your Mind

By Roderick Nash, *Backpacker*, February/March, 1979, pp. 39-41, 70-72

Originally delivered as the 1978 Wilderness Resource Distinguished Lecture at the University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center on April 18, 1978, under the title "Wilderness Management: A Contradiction in Terms?"

Wilderness does not exist. It never has. It is a feeling about a place, part of the geography of the mind. In an effort to construct a workable definition, we draw lines on maps and pass complicated laws. We act as if wilderness were real—rocks, trees, canyons, mountains, - but it is actually a state of mind evoked by a state of nature, a quality associated by some people with some places. This explains why the conditions under which one visits a place are so crucial to the so-called wilderness experience. It also suggests why wilderness management may be a contradiction in terms.

Wilderness is the uncontrolled. Dig back far enough into the historical meaning of "wilderness" and that concept emerges as the essence of any definition. *Will*, the root word in early Teutonic languages of both *wild* and *wilderness* meant chaotic, unruly, disorderly – literally will-full. An angry mob of people beating at the castle gate was said to be wild – ungovernable, out of control. So were animals that man had not domesticated or tamed. The place one found such uncontrolled animals, called *deor* in the old tongues, was wild-deor-ness—literally the place of the wild beasts. Their presence signified the absence of human control.

Contemporary meanings of wilderness emphasize the same concept. When he drafted the Wilderness Act, Howard Zahniser, executive director of The Wilderness Society, chose as his principal descriptive adjective an unusual word: "untrammeled." When Zahniser began using it in 1956, everyone assumed that his secretary had erred in typing "untrampled." But Zahniser stood behind his original choice, and with good reason. A trammel, he explained, is a net for catching wild birds or fish. Alternatively, the word signifies a shackle used to slow the gait of a horse. The central idea is that of restraint, control, management by man. Untrammeled means the opposite.

The uncontrolled is unpredictable and therefore potentially dangerous. An untrammeled horse is a bucking bronco. In the psychology of wilderness we cannot minimize the centrality of danger, risk, and fear. To be true to the basic definition, wilderness should be a place where it is possible to get lost, to become, literally, bewildered (the root word, *will* is the same). Reducing this possibility may make a place more pleasant to some people, but it will be less wild. For this reason the existence of trails, guidebooks, ranger patrols, and well-organized search and rescue squads poised to bail out the unlucky or incompetent strikes at the very essence of wilderness. And since wilderness is a state of mind, even the knowledge that these things exist diminishes the wilderness feeling. It is even arguable that as soon as we label a region wilderness, we destroy it as wilderness.

Maps have an especially erosive effect on wilderness in that they make the unknown known. Aldo Leopold defined wilderness in 1945 as "a blank spot on the map." It was this for Columbus, Lewis and Clark, John Wesley Powell, and still for Leopold as a young officer in the Untied States Forest Service in the New Mexico Territory in 1909. Presently the United States Geological Survey is moving inexorably ahead with its intent to publish 15- and 7.5-minute topographic maps for the last spots in the 48 contiguous states. Alaska is next. The completion of this monumental task - the reduction of the United States to the scale of one inch to the mile—will be a just cause for celebration for that part of ourselves and our culture that seeks to order, organize, measure, and control. But for the other part (the right side of our brain, psychologists believe), there is something terribly sad and terribly final about the end of uncertainty. At least those who understand what wilderness means cannot rejoice in the prospect of a country that is totally mapped.

The history of wilderness management is the history of increasing control over wilderness. But for a half-century after the establishment of the first reserves, wilderness preservation did not entail wilderness management. It simply meant designation. You drew a circle on a map as, for instance, in the cases of Yellowstone National Park (1872) and Gila Primitive Area (1924), and concentrated on keeping things like roads and buildings out. No one was concerned with what people engaged in recreation did in the wilderness. It was not a matter of oversight—in fairness to the federal land administrators of this era, there really was little to manage.

Before 1940 very, very few Americans ventured into the backcountry. It is easy, amidst the widespread touting of the wilderness today, to forget that our fathers and grandfathers were still very much a part of the frontier-shaped value system that emphasized conquest of, not communion with, wild places and things. As we wander the well-stocked aisles of today's outdoor stores, it is also easy to overlook how hard it used to be to go off the beaten track for more than a day or two. Any contemporary backpacking outfit is largely composed of materials derived from post-World War II technology—nylon, aluminum, plastics, foam rubber, freeze dried foods. Without this equipment revolution, roughing it, in the parlance of the turn of the century, was indeed rough and unappealing.

What most outdoor-minded Americans before 1940 wanted was a room with a view—a comfortable lodge from which to watch wild nature without getting too close. After 1916 the first leaders of the National Park Service, Stephen T. Mather and Horace M. Albright, never forgot this in their campaign to make the parks popular. What emerged in Yosemite, Yellowstone, Glacier, and the Grand Canyon were resorts complete with paved roads, downhill skiing, putting greens, scheduled feedings of bears with hotel garbage, the firefall in Yosemite, and colored lights on night eruptions of Old Faithful. No one in the 1920s and 1930s saw these things as incompatible with the national park idea.

Fortunately for wilderness, the "circuses" were confined to small areas of the western parks. The few who did go into the wilderness in those years, like David R. Brower of the Sierra Club, could claim a first ascent almost every time they climbed a peak. For a magic interlude, wilderness management could actually consist of letting things alone.

One of the first indications that this could change was in a 1926 cartoon in the *New York Herald Tribune.* It was a before and after view of a mountain lake. In the first frame a lone horseman approached the lake, which was surrounded with pines and full of leaping trout. In the second view a solid rank of fishermen ringed the lake, and their camps obliterated the scenery.

A decade later Lowell Sumner, a regional wildlife technician with the National Park Service, made one of the first official recognitions that wilderness managers could not rest content with merely setting land aside from development. In his 1936 report on parks in California's Sierra, Sumner wondered "how large a crowd can be turned loose in a wilderness without destroying its essential qualities." Sumner was among the first Americans to understand that if wilderness is to exist in the national parks, the parks "cannot hope to accommodate unlimited numbers of people." Sumner also understood that wilderness management could pose a threat to wilderness values. He urged that only "the very simplest maintenance activity" be undertaken in wilderness.

The Wilderness Society, organized in 1935, initially reflected the designation-is-enough perspective on wilderness preservation. The idea was to keep adverse influences out of wilderness rather than to understand and control what was happening within its borders. But Robert Marshall, a Wilderness Society founder and leading advocate of preservation in the 1930s, quickly perceived that there was an internal dimension to wilderness protection. As early as 1933, Marshall's contribution to *A National Plan for American Forestry* suggested that backcountry campsites could be overused and urged the education of recreational visitors in camping etiquette.

In 1937 Marshall, then chief of the Division of Recreation and Lands in the Untied States Forest Service, toured the mountains of California with members of the Sierra Club. The party visited high country severely damaged by the grazing of pack stock and the behavior of campers. After the trip Marshall requested Joel H. Hildebrand, president of the Sierra Club, to organize a committee to advise the Forest Service with regard to wilderness management. He wanted to know about the feasibility of distributing and restricting use to the end that "certain areas may still be preserved in what might be termed a super-wilderness condition, or, in other words, kept entirely free even from trails, in order that a traveler can have the feeling of being where no one has ever been before." For Marshall to pose this question was understandable, in that he personally coveted the extreme condition of wilderness and had, in fact, found it in the Brooks Range of Alaska on his explorations of the 1920s and early 1930s.

The communications between Marshall and the Sierra Club in 1937 and 1938 constituted the first recognition that recreational management of wilderness could threaten wilderness. The construction of trails was recognized as a problem for persons who wanted the sense of being in pristine country. Trail signs and established campgrounds also came in for criticism, as did the grazing of pack animals and the cutting of living trees for bough beds and

firewood. The Sierra Club concluded its report by recommending that high-country rangers or guards be appointed to enforce the rules. But neither Marshall nor the Sierra Club then understood that the rangers themselves, and the rules, might also adversely influence wilderness perception.

In the November 1940 issue of *American Forests*, J.V.K. Wagar became the first to raise the possibility of licensing as a means of controlling the behavior of persons engaged in wilderness recreation. He began by pointing out that "nature once certified outdoorsmen" by weeding out and killing the weak, foolish, and careless. But now anyone could become a wilderness traveler, and many people were in the backcountry who did not know how to care for either themselves or the country. His suggested remedy was the Certified Outdoorsman. The National Park Service and the Forest Service would establish tests with the purpose of determining who was "safe to leave in the woods." Once in possession of his license, the Outdoorsman would be admitted to wilderness.

Wagar's proposal, which has support in some quarters today, has the advantage of making possible less intense wilderness management due to the fact that the users are skilled and careful. Search-and-rescue operations, for example, could be curtailed or eliminated. But the licensing idea strikes at the heart of the idea of uncontrolled country that is so central to the traditional meaning of wilderness.

Following the interruption of World War II, the Sierra Club renewed its interest in wilderness management. The club's own outings, which at that time found more than a hundred persons traveling through the wilderness in one group, were a focal point. Club leaders were discovering that excessive recreational use could damage natural conditions just as severely as lumbering, mining, and commercial grazing.

One sequence of photographs published in the 1947 *Sierra Club Bulletin* showed the stages in the transformation of a lush mountain meadow into an eroded dust bowl. Discussing the problem under the heading "saturation of the wilderness," Richard M. Leonard and Lowell Sumner declared, "We need a comprehensive technique of use that will prevent oversaturation of wilderness and still enable people, in reasonable numbers, to enjoy wilderness." Among the management tools discussed were rotation of campsites, limitation on the length of stay by one party in the same area, and the use of transported oats rather than natural grasses for pack stock food. According to Leonard and Sumner, there already existed 24-hour limits on camping in some Sierra meadows. These 1947 rules must have been among the earliest such controls in wilderness management history.

In 1949 the Sierra Club sponsored the first High Sierra Wilderness Conference. One hundred federal and state administrators and outfitters joined to discuss the proposition that wilderness could be loved to death. The conferees, in other words, had the courage to recognize that they were part of the problem.

A recognizable problem in the 1950s, the crowding of wilderness reached crisis proportions in the 1970s. Several factors contributed to the wilderness recreation boom. The intellectual revolution that transformed wilderness from cultural enemy to cultural asset was nearing completion. The nation had grown up from its frontier adolescence. Only about three percent of the 48 states could be considered wild, and about the same amount was paved! For the great majority of Americans wilderness was no longer an adversary to be feared and conquered but a novelty to be sought as a refreshing antidote to an urban-industrial lifestyle and the controlling weight of an increasingly complex civilization. If the counterculture of the 1960s had any definable meaning, it was that the establishment had gone too far with growth, progress, control, and transformation. Nature acquired a new appeal. Charles Reich wrote about *The Greening of America*; Paul Simon and Art Garfunkle sang "I'd rather be a forest than a street."

Better equipment, and the affluence and leisure to buy and use it, helped to open the wilderness. So did the publicity generated by the campaign for the Wilderness Act (1964) and the fight to preserve threatened wilderness such as the Grand Canyon, the North Cascades, and Hells Canyon. As a result, many Americans no longer thought of the national parks as resorts near the wilderness but rather as places to experience wilderness.

The proof of the new popularity of wilderness was in visitor statistics. Every part of the country could supply evidence, but the most dramatic varieties came from the "name" wildernesses of the West. Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the Untied States outside Alaska, is a case in point. Dominating California's southern Sierra, Mount Whitney was first climbed in 1873. On August 4, 1949, a man climbed the peak with his father. Proudly, they signed the register on the summit, the sixth and seventh individuals to have done so that year. On August 11, 1972, the

same man climbed Mount Whitney with his son. Upon signing the register they noted with some shock that they were the 259th and 260th persons on record that day!

Or consider the Grand Canyon in Arizona, where the 280-mile float trip down the Colorado River is the most intensely supervised wilderness activity in the United States today. Due to the limited access to the river, a complete set of visitor statistics exists. They tell an incredible story.

Similar, if not quite so dramatic, statistical portraits could be drawn for the Middle Fork of Idaho's Salmon River, Washington's Mount Rainier, or New Hampshire's White Mountains.

Faced with this surge in popularity managers turned to the idea of carrying capacity. A stockman's term, it originally referred to the number of head of cattle that could graze a piece of range without causing its permanent deterioration. The point, of course, was to keep the number from exceeding the carrying capacity and ruining the range.

The first American to apply this concept to people and wild country was Lowell Sumner. In 1942 he wrote an essay concerning the biological balances in wilderness areas and urged that visitation be kept "within the carrying capacity or 'recreational saturation point'." Sumner defined this as " the maximum degree of the highest type of recreational use [that is, minimum impact camping] which a wilderness can receive, consistent with its long-term preservation." "Managers," Sumner urged, "should determine in advance the probable maximum permissible use, short of impairment, of all wilderness areas."

In 1942 Sumner's main concern was the biological carrying capacity of wilderness, the impact of people on nature. It was relatively easy to measure. An eroded meadow or fished-out lake wildernesses greatly exceeds the established carrying capacity, so lotteries are held. Applicants try to cheat the system; still the chances of drawing out a permit for a noncommercial, do-it-yourself trip have declined in places like the Grand Canyon to approximately one in 20. This is, to be sure, an extreme case, but the era of driving to a roadhead, parking your car, and taking off into the backcountry is definitely over, and with it ends much of what wilderness once meant.

Even with a permit in hand, control does not end. "No substitution" rules, in force in the Grand Canyon and on the Salmon River, require rangers to check drivers license or birth certificate for each member of a party. Then there is the frequently encountered practice of assigning campsites. For many wilderness users this is the final backbreaking straw. Their itineraries must be rigid. The wilderness is managed as a motel: check out and allow the next group to occupy the site. Extremes have also been reached in the regulation of camping procedure. Open wood fires are on their way out as part of a wilderness experience. In the proposed management plan for the Grand Canyon River trips, permittees are required to carry out all human sewage - for a party of up to 40 for a two-week trip! Rangers presumably will check the containers at the end of the trips to see that regulations have been observed. For many this would be the ultimate indignity—to people, and to the idea of wilderness.

If the recent history of wilderness management contains reason for concern, the future looms dark with problems. The interesting scenario of William C. Leitch entitled "Backpacking in 2078" assumes, quite plausibly that in the next century electronic technology, world population, and wilderness popularity will continue to grow at their recent rates. Leitch envisions a global, computerized reservation-permit system that tells his hypothetical applicant that he may take an 11-night trip three years after his application. He had, after all, enjoyed a three-week wilderness trip four years before. When the applicant appears at the appointed time and place he is issued a tiny transmitting device that informs rangers back at headquarters where he is at all times during his trip. He is also issued a small plate to imbed in his boot heel, to aid in search-and-rescue, but his Mayday attachment can summon a helicopter in half an hour. The large animals in the hypothetical park also have transmitting devices so that, say, human-bear interactions can be avoided. At headquarters it is like a giant game of chess.

The near-absolute control over the "wilderness" does, Leitch points out, guarantee the visitor a solitary experience. His itinerary is planned so he will encounter no other person for his allotted stay. Moreover, the natural resources in the park are in excellent condition, nearly undisturbed. The park of 2078, in short, is a management triumph; the only trouble is that the wilderness is dead - the victim of human control.

The Leitch scenario, to which anyone familiar with wilderness recreation could add, underscores the terrible dilemma of wilderness management today. The managers have to manage. If they don't, crowds will quickly eliminate any vestige of solitude and the resource itself is damaged. But the very fact of management destroys the very essence of wilderness.

Awareness that wilderness management is indeed a contradiction in terms, but at the same time a necessity if anyone is to have any semblance of a wilderness experience, is a prerequisite to enlightened planning for the future. Wilderness managers are not bad guys. Things would be worse without them. But in controlling wilderness they might attempt to be as unobtrusive as possible.

What this means is that the element of risk, the presence of danger and mystery, should be cherished and protected. Better to have an occasional backpacker killed by a bear than to put transistors in every moving thing in the backcountry along the lines of the Leitch forecast. Better to reduce visitation than to institute mandatory carrying out of human feces. Better to require wilderness licensing as evidence of minimum-impact camping skill than to send waves of patrolling, ticket-writing rangers through the mountains and down the canyons. Better to have some visitors get lost than to have signs at every trail crossing. Better to give self-guided but well-trained and properly equipped parties precedence over commercially outfitted and guided safaris in allocating limited time in wilderness. If that means that some people cannot make the trip, tough. The ability to write a check to a professional guide is no substitute for physical, intellectual, and psychological preparedness. Let those who want to go badly enough compete and qualify as they do, for instance, for state universities, rather than buy their way into wilderness.

The point is to manage so that less management is necessary. Upon this seemingly simple, but enormously difficult principle hangs the fate of everything the wilderness preservation movement has tried to achieve. The sad alternative is to have wilderness that is not wild.

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PEW WILDERNESS CENTER
Briefing Paper

National Parks and Their Wilderness

A Compilation of Historic Viewpoints

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Our parks are reservoirs of wilderness.

—Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey
Congressional Record, February 11, 1957

The wilderness proper serves all park visitors. Those who penetrate it gain its fullest rewards. But, it is the part of a National Park that is not intensively used that makes a park, and the undeveloped wilderness beyond the roads furnishes the setting and the background. Take away the background, and the park atmosphere of the whole disappears, and with it a very large part of the pleasure of those whose only contact with wilderness is experienced as they look outward over it from the roadside.

—National Park Service, *The National Park Wilderness*
(Washington, D.C., September 1957): 15

The place of wilderness preservation in the National Park System has a rich history, subject to diverse viewpoints expressed within the National Park Service, Congress and the wilderness advocacy community. This paper bring together some of those viewpoints—quoted from original documents and, within each topic, in historical sequence.

I. The *Wilderness* Purpose of National Parks

– 1 –

Such regulations [by the Secretary] shall provide for the preservation, from injury or spoilation, of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park, and their retention in their natural condition. The Secretary may … grant leases … of small parcels of ground, at such places in said park as shall require the erection of buildings for the accommodation of visitors; … and the construction of roads and bridle-paths therein.

—An Act to Set Apart a Certain Tract of Land Lying near the Headwaters of the Yellowstone River as a Public Park (1872)[1]

– 2 –

Every previous act demanded that the parks be preserved in their natural state. Their natural state was wilderness.

—Horace M. Albright (Recollection)[2]

– 3 –

Thus was born the idea of the national parks, perpetual wildernesses, the last remnants of Nature's handiwork on this teeming earth. They are to be preserved forever in their natural state for the benefit and enjoyment of the people, to use the exact words of the act of Congress of 1872, creating the Yellowstone National Park. …

Of course the parks should remain wildernesses. It is true that they are the only primeval areas protected by law from the ravages of civilization. They must be saved as such.

—HORACE M. ALBRIGHT (1928)[3]

– 4 –

… Congress set aside the *whole* of Yellowstone, reserving not merely a geyser, a canyon, or a spectacular waterfall, but the total scene in all its vastness and variety. The men who defined the first National Park were thinking in wilderness terms.

—NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (1957)[4]

II. THE 1916 ORGANIC ACT AND WILDERNESS

– 1 –

The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations … by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purposes of the said parks, monuments and reservations, which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

—AN ACT TO ESTABLISH A NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES (1916)[5]

– 2 –

There has been a persistent question through the years about whether we were aware of and discussed the paradox of use and enjoyment of the parks by the people versus their preservation "unimpaired." Of course, we knew there was this paradox, but the organic acts creating Yellowstone, Yosemite, and other parks always contained these opposite tenets. We felt it was understood to be the standing policy.

The same is true of wilderness: we didn't specifically state policy about wilderness at this time [in the organic act] because we concluded it was understood. Every previous act demanded that the parks be preserved in their natural state. Their natural state was wilderness. That was why the 1916 act made no provision for roads, trails, buildings, or anything else—only that concessions be granted.

The general philosophy of the time was "use." Resources were to be used. [That will] always be the national forest idea. Our group and followers were conservationists and preservationists. No use of resources, no change in the general state of national park areas. But roads to enjoy the outstanding, easy-to-visit features of a park while leaving most areas in wilderness…."

—HORACE M. ALBRIGHT (RECOLLECTION)[6]

– 3 –

Putting the policy enunciated by Congress in other words, it was the intention to preserve for coming generations, as well as for the people of our own times, certain sections of our original wilderness areas, in order that these bits of natural America may always be a source of interest, inspiration and pleasure to the people.

—HORACE M. ALBRIGHT (1928)[7]

– 4 –

The organic National Park Service Act of 1916 offers nearly as much flexibility in managing recreation resources as the multiple-use principle of the Forest Service. There is nothing in the Act directing how much of, or what part of parks to develop, nor is there any clause in the law or interpretive regulations stipulating the reservation of park units in wilderness condition. The Park Service has established some precedence [sic] in trying to retain wilderness zones. It is questionable, however, whether the will of the administrator can be sufficiently strong to prevent development in the long run.

—JAMES P. GILLIGAN (1954)[8]

– 5 –

Our national parks and many of our national monuments include within them our superbly beautiful pristine areas of wilderness. The chief threats to their preservation as such, under existing legislation, come from prospects for the extension of roads and the intrusion of recreation developments, perfectly good in themselves, that nevertheless are out of place in wilderness.

Unless provision is made to protect the primeval within the parks, eventually the developments may take over.

This process may be gradual, but, nevertheless, it is a prospect against which we can now set guards with no sacrifice.

It is true, however, that certain portions of the parks must be used for the roads and accommodations that make them accessible and hospitable. Accordingly this bill [the 1957 version of the Wilderness Bill] provides for the designation of such portions for the purpose. ***

If ever additional areas are needed for development, they can be designated, but only after a public notice that will give all concerned an opportunity to weigh the importance of diminishing the area of wilderness. ***

The primeval back country receives an added protection.

—SEN. HUBERT H. HUMPHREY (1957)[9]

– 6 –

Within the national parks and monuments in general there is at present no Act of Congress that would prevent a future Secretary of the Interior, or park administrator with his approval, from deciding to construct a road, a building, or any other installation that he would deem appropriate for a national park or monument anywhere within the park or monument.

The Yellowstone Act that inaugurated our national parks in 1872 provided for the retention of the wonders there … 'in their natural condition,' and yet that Act has, of course, not interfered with the construction of the Yellowstone Park roads, the many buildings that are there, and the other developments that have so altered 'natural conditions' that the atmosphere in some parts of the park is that of a crowded city. …

I am merely pointing out that [the roads and developments] have been constructed in accordance with the laws under which the park is governed, and there is nothing in that law to prevent such construction anywhere in the park.

In my opinion, if we are to make sure that we will have in the distant future our national park primeval back county still preserved as wilderness, we should declare here in Congress our purpose to do so.

REP. JOHN P. SAYLOR (1957)[10]

– 7 –

The fact that existing legislation does not insure the preservation of areas within the parks and monuments as wilderness is evident in the fact that under the existing [national park] legislation all roads and buildings and other development now in the parks and monuments have been constructed, and more and more could be. There is nothing in our [national park] legislation now to protect future administrators from

mounting pressures to use more and more of the back country for developments that would destroy them as wilderness.

—HOWARD ZAHNISER (1957)[11]

– 8 –

When we started our basic studies for the program we now called MISSION 66, our first step was to review the laws which form the foundation and provide the guidelines for management and development of the Nation's National Parks. All of these laws emphasize the preservation of wilderness values. Clearly it is the will of the American people, as expressed by many acts of Congress, that the Secretary of the Interior through the National Park Service shall preserve the wilderness values of the National Park System for the enjoyment of the people.

—CONRAD L. WIRTH (1957)[12]

– 9 –

This basic act uses the singular form of the word "purpose"—a single objective, not several. That single purpose inseparably combines *use* with *preservation*!

—NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (1957)[13]

III. EARLY DISENCHANTMENT WITH NATIONAL PARK SERVICE EFFORTS FOR WILDERNESS PRESERVATION

– 1 –

COMPILER'S NOTE: In 1914 Mark Daniels was appointed as first "general superintendent and landscape architect" for the national parks. NPS historian Richard Sellars observes:

> In remarks to a 1915 national park conference, Daniels stressed the need for systematic planning. Tellingly, he explained how the implementation of park plans depended in part on the successful promotion of tourism. He commented that the parks "can not get a sufficient appropriation at present from Congress to develop … plans and put them on the ground as they should be, therefore we are working for an increase in attendance which will give us a justification for a demand upon Congress to increase the appropriations that are necessary …."[14]

As Richard Sellars points out, "Daniels' comments suggested a kind of perpetual motion that would become a significant aspect of national park management, where tourism and development would sustain and energize each other through their interdependence."[15]

– 2 –

It may also be asked whether the National Parks from which, let us hope, industrial development will continue to be excluded, do not fill the public demand [for wilderness] here being discussed. They do, in part. But … the Parks are being networked with roads and trails as rapidly as possible. This is right and proper.

—ALDO LEOPOLD (1921)[16]

– 3 –

The older champions of our national parks, [such] as John Muir, were among the leaders in this country to see in a broad way the value of preserving wild areas, but in recent years there has been an intensive movement to get vast crowds into the national parks, and at such a rate that vast areas of the parks are without question being severely injured.

—DR. CHARLES C. ADAMS (1925)[17]